YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Halakha and Israeli History**

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**This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l,**

**whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev.**

**May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified**

**the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.**

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**Shiur #0**8**: 6 October, 1973**

**Yom Kippur War, Part I**

On Saturday, October 6, 1973, just after 2 PM, the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a two-front offensive on Israel. The day of the surprise attack was chosen precisely, for that fateful day was Yom Kippur: a day when the country completely shuts down, a day when hundreds of thousands of Israelis, including soldiers, are in synagogue fasting and praying.

The attack caught the Israeli army off-guard and unprepared. Even though there were numerous signs and indications that war was inevitable, Israeli intelligence ignored them all. In the first three days, both Arab armies advanced quickly, capturing the Hermon post in the north and territories of the Sinai Peninsula in the south.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When the shocking news of the Arab successes reached the Israeli public, there was deep concern and fear that the State of Israel faced an existential threat. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan was rumored to refer to the situation as a potential “Destruction of the Third Temple.”

The *tefillot* and religious services on that holy day were interrupted as thousands of reserve soldiers were called up and sent straight to the bloody battlefields. The feeling of many was that they were fighting for their home.

In those first days, many soldiers were killed, injured or taken captive. Due to the heavy loss of Israeli soldiers, the IDF Chief Rabbinate created temporary cemeteries. The fallen soldiers were buried in these temporary graves, and only after the war were the bodies exhumed and reinterred in military cemeteries. In some cases, family members were only informed weeks later that the soldier had been killed. Many soldiers’ bodies were never found.

Confusion and chaos were everywhere and yet, within a few days, after heroic battles, the IDF was able to hold the line and stop the enemy’s advances.

The dramatic change in the course of the war took place over Sukkot.

In the north, on the first day of Sukkot (five days after Yom Kippur), Israeli forces ended their defense and moved to the offense. In the next few days, the IDF fought bravely in the Golan Heights against Iraqi and Jordanian forces that had come to the aid of the Syrian forces.

Down south, it took a bit longer. On 15 October, the fourth day of Chol Ha-mo’ed Sukkot, the army began its counterattack, which continued until the end of the war with the IDF crossing over the Suez Canal and laying siege to the Egyptian army. The ceasefire, which was forced on Israel by Russian pressure, found Israeli tanks a mere **100** km from Cairo and 35 km from Damascus.

As a result of the radical changeover in such a short time, from the abyss of disaster to a stunning victory against overwhelming forces of multiple armies, many recognized the battles of this war to be no less than miraculous.

After the war, a committee was appointed by the government to investigate the IDF’s unpreparedness and its failure to analyze military intelligence. The [committee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_Committee_(Israel)) was headed by [Shimon Agranat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimon_Agranat), Chief Justice of [Israel's Supreme Court](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Court_of_Israel), and thus it was named the Agranat Commission.

In their report, the committee was critical of what it called the "concept" in military intelligence thinking. The "concept" was based on the assumption that Egypt would only attack if it had the ability to take on the [Israeli Air Force](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_Air_Force). Military intelligence also thought that Syria would only attack if Egypt did. In the absence of any upgrading of Egypt's air force, the directorate had concluded there was no threat of imminent war.

**The Religious Meaning of the War**

The difficult questions, shock and bewilderment were also felt in the religious world. The Air Force’s Chief Chaplain, Rabbi A.H. Rabinowitz, describes the atmosphere around that time:

“Rabbi, why did it happen on *Yom Kippur*?" The question was voiced by a young female trainee during one of my sessions at the officer’s training school. She did not ask why it happened; she knew that only too well. Every youngster in Israel grows up with the feeling that he may well have to fight to live. His brothers, sisters, parents, uncles and aunts have all done and are doing just that. Why should his lot be different in a hostile world? "But, Rabbi, what was the significance of it happening on *Yom Kippur*?" The question rang across the hall then and it has been resounding in my ears ever since. For the first time in my life, I was almost at a loss for words. This youngster sensed the deeper significance of it having occurred on *Yom Kippur*. She sensed it; I could not explain it. My lame response hardly bears repeating. I failed her dismally. Perhaps I failed myself even more so. Why did it have to be *Yom Kippur*? What Jewish historical logic lies beneath the surface? Where in the maze of the bewildering labyrinth of Messianic times lies the key? The Jewish soul and consciousness were stirred in an unfathomable manner that relate to the essence of Jewish being. Why *Yom Kippur*?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rabbi Rabinowitz understands the war as a wakeup call to the entire Jewish State. The horrors of the war require the people of Israel to ask themselves the “big” questions about the relationship between being Israeli and being Jewish. He attributes great significance to the fact that the war began on our holiest day of the year:

It had to be *Yom Kippur*. It could only have happened on *Yom Kippur*. Because *Yom Kippur* is that moment in Jewish life when a man faces himself. When a people comes face to face with its being, with its past and with its future.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, addressing the lessons to be learned from the Six-Day War, reflects on his thoughts in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. In his opinion, the great euphoria created by the success of Six-Day War led to arrogance and forgetting God:

That both conflicting emotions—the Messianic euphoria and the military self-assurance—were unrealistic, was proven by the Arab surprise attack on Yom Kippur 1973, which punctured the balloon of Israel’s imaginary invincibility. Israel was unprepared, the troops untrained for war, supplies were largely unavailable when and where needed, and so on. The successful counterattack by the Israelis, no matter how brilliant, did not make up for the sudden feeling that we had all been “taken”…

My mind, during this period, inevitably turned to the powerful passage in (Deut. 8:11-18):

Beware lest you forget the Lord your God . . . lest when you have eaten and are full and you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” But you should remember the Lord your God: for it is He who gives you the power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

What happened to cause such a reversal of fortune? What happened was that self-confidence morphed into arrogance, and arrogance into unforgivable carelessness.

We forgot the God of Israel and learned nothing from the triumph of the Six-Day War…[[3]](#footnote-3)

Yeshivat Har Etzion lost eight students during the war. Rav Amital, the founding *rosh yeshiva*, was torn between personal anguish and the need to strengthen and give hope to his students, as well as the desire to understand the meaning of this seeming reversal in the process of redemption. He questioned the meaning of the war, whether or not this was a retreat from God’s plan of redemption. Were we still living in the times of *atchalta di-ge’ula* (the beginning of the redemption)?[[4]](#footnote-4)

His redemptive reading of events was darkened, but unshaken. In his theological response to the traumatic events, he writes, “It is clear that we are in the process of redemption.”[[5]](#footnote-5) He argues that there are three compelling reasons to see this war as part of a larger messianic plan:[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. The battles were directly connected to the rebuilding of *Malkhut Yisrael,* Jewish sovereignty.

1. Many Arab states participated in the war, which almost resulted in a US-Soviet nuclear confrontation.
2. The final victory was great, miraculous and of biblical proportions.

Regarding the last point, Rav Amital mentions that with all the pain and sadness that came with war, we still have an obligation to thank God for the great miracles which occurred during the battles.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As a matter of fact, following the great debate amongst the Posekim regarding the recital of *Hallel* on Yom Ha-atzmaut, Rav Shlomo Goren declared after the Yom Kippur War that now more than ever *Hallel* must be recited with a *berakha.*[[8]](#footnote-8) This comes from the understanding that the victories of this war may have been the most miraculous of all wars.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Rav Chaim David HaLevi, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, addressed the meaning of the war at the annual gathering of rabbis at Mossad Ha-Rav Kook in Yerushalayim.[[10]](#footnote-10) On the one hand, he questioned Rav Menachem Kasher’s opinion that this war should be considered *milchemet Gog u-Magog* (a climactic battle that will precipitate the Messianic redemption). On the other hand he assures his audience that the process of redemption that began with the establishment of State of Israel is still intact.

When looking for the meaning of the terrible blow the country received, he mentions that the lack of commitment to the Land of Israel and especially to the newly liberated territories of Yehuda, Shomeron and Aza, might have been a reason.

It is interesting to note that in fact the war quickened the messianic energies of the settler movement, which crystallized into Gush Emunim (the movement that began settling the West Bank).

These attempts to explain the meaning of historical events and to interpret God’s hand in history has deep roots in the classic philosophers of religious Zionism.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rav Amital himself explains in the beginning of his article why the search for meaning is so important:

A Jew who believes that events touching on the life of *Am Yisrael* are guided by divine providence will naturally inquire as to their meaning and significance. The Torah and the prophets command us unceasingly to pay attention. It is also a natural intellectual inquiry for one based in faith. If events pass one by without one attempting to penetrate the depth of their true meaning, the sages consider such a person dead.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Yet I believe that in these following words, one can sense that Rav Amital is adamant that there are limitations to man’s attempt to completely understand the meanings of history.

Clearly, we do not have the tools to know the secrets of God and to know the considerations, motives, and intentions of divine providence, “for My thoughts are not your thoughts” ([*Is.* 55:8](https://www.sefaria.org/Isaiah.55.8?lang=he-en)). However, this does not exempt us from our obligation to observe and to delve. It is Torah, and we must study it.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Next week we will discuss the halakhic questions that arose during the war.

1. For a detailed description of the entire war see Chaim Herzog*, Milchemet Yom Ha-din*, published by Yedioth Ahronoth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. H. Rabinowitz, “Why Yom Kippur?” *Tradition*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Fall 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Norman Lamm, “Remembering the Six-Day War: Then and Now,” *Tradition*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All the following quotes and sources of Rav Amital are taken from “*Le-mashma’utah shel Milchemet Yom Ha-kippurim*,” in Rav Amital’s book *Ha-ma’alot Mi-ma’amakim*(Alon Shevut: 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ha-ma’alot Mi-ma’amakim,* pp. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ha-ma’alot Mi-ma’amakim,* pp. 22-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ha-ma’alot Mi-ma’amakim,* p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Article in *Hatzofeh* newspaper, 17 April, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Herzog, p.250, who calls this war the greatest achievement of the Israeli army in all of its history. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Torah she-be’al Peh* (1975), pp. 63-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For more about this idea, especially in the works of Rav Amital, see: *We Have Fled from You to You: Rav Amital and the Shoah* by Rav Reuven Ziegler and Dr. Yehudah Mirsky, available at: https://etzion.org.il/en/%E2%80%9Cwe-have-fled-you-you%E2%80%9D-rav-amital-and-shoah. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ha-ma’alot Mi-ma’amakim,*p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ha-ma’alot Mi-ma’amakim,*p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)